The 40th Anniversary of the Crime Report

by Thomas E. Feucht, Ph.D., and Edwin Zedlewski, Ph.D.

About the Authors

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Editor's Note: *More than four decades ago, the President of the United States established the Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice to examine public safety in the United States. An overarching question guided its work: What should be the role of the Federal Government in fighting crime and enhancing public safety? That question remains as important today as it was then. The Commission's answers form the history, character, and mission of today's National Institute of Justice and its sister bureaus in the Office of Justice Programs.*[1] *On the 40th anniversary of the Commission's seminal report,* The Challenge of Crime in a Free Society,[2] *the* Journal *asked two of the National Institute of Justice's (NIJ) most senior researchers to commemorate the leadership and vision of the President's Crime Commission and to celebrate the accomplishments of NIJ's State and local criminal justice and research partners.*

The 1960's were a tumultuous decade. The United States faced increasing social unrest at home, as it fought a war overseas. Lyndon Johnson, who had risen to office following the assassination of John F. Kennedy, was confronted with significant challenges as he began his 1964 presidential campaign. Johnson brought to his campaign—and ultimately to his presidency—a vision of America that would help meet those challenges. Believing that the Nation could become a "Great Society,"[3] he outlined his commitment to fight poverty, improve education, and end racial inequality.

The President's ambitious agenda envisioned that the Federal Government would address a broad spectrum of social problems. For all its breadth, however, Johnson's plan paid little attention to the issue of crime. His failure to include any new significant Federal role in fighting crime was not surprising. Early in the 1964 campaign, Johnson had declared that crime was a local problem and that the

Federal Government did not have the power—nor should it have—to deal with it.

His opponent, Barry Goldwater, raised the issue repeatedly during the campaign. Goldwater decried the Nation's crime problem and challenged what he characterized as Johnson's disregard for public safety.

Although Johnson was elected in a landslide, his position on the issue of crime would soon recognize that crime really was a national problem, and the Federal Government needed to provide new leadership to combat it.

'The Blueprints to Banish Crime'

As interest in the debate grew, it became clear that the Nation lacked even the most basic information about crime and crime trends. It was nearly impossible to say just how bad crime really was because there were no reliable, comparable data on crime across jurisdictions.[4] A lack of operational data on the police, courts, and other justice agencies made it impossible to measure what was being done to fight crime.

Soon after his inauguration, Johnson acknowledged the need for a Federal response to crime and public safety. In a March 1965 address to Congress—the first by a president on the issue of crime—Johnson called for legislation to create an Office of Law Enforcement Assistance.[5] He also established the President's Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice, charging the members to draw up "the blueprints that we need . . . to banish crime."[6]

The task—breathtaking in scope—reflected not only the "can do" attitude of Johnson's Great Society, but also a growing confidence in the ability of science and technology to solve problems. The Nation was already improving public health, harnessing atomic energy, and putting a man on the moon. Why not unleash that same creative power to eliminate crime?

With Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach at the helm, the 19-member Commission greeted the assignment with enthusiasm and energy. It created task forces and committees around major crime issues, such as juvenile delinquency, policing, courts, corrections, organized crime, and drugs. It collected data and analyzed statistics on an unprecedented scale. It created the first crime victimization survey, the first composite picture of State correctional populations, and the first conceptualization—

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in the form of a schematic diagram—of the criminal justice system *process*. (See related story, "Al Blumstein: 40 Years of Contributions to Criminal Justice," p. 14.) Never before had anyone examined police, prosecution, defense, the courts, and corrections in a single frame of reference.

Only 18 months after receiving Johnson's mandate, the Commission issued its report, *The Challenge of Crime in a Free Society.*

The Past Informs the Future

The Commission was extraordinarily prescient about technology. Its recommendations included separate radio bands for police communication, automated fingerprint systems, and investments in computing and information systems—this, at the very advent of the computer age.

The overarching need for research was also acknowledged: "The Commission has found and discussed throughout this report many needs of law enforcement and the administration of criminal justice. But what it has found to be the greatest need is the need to know."[7]

One of the Commission's recommendations was that Congress create a new office in the Justice Department devoted to assisting State and local law enforcement departments. The Law Enforcement Assistance Administration, and within it the National Institute of Law Enforcement and Criminal Justice—known today as the Office of Justice Programs and the National Institute of Justice, respectively—continue to deliver Federal support to what remains a locally determined and managed justice system. These agencies demonstrate the unique Federal role in fighting crime—not by usurping the rights or responsibilities of local jurisdictions, but by leveraging the power of the Federal Government to add value to the efforts of local criminal justice and law enforcement agencies across the Nation.

The President's Crime Commission thrust "ordinary street crime" irreversibly into policy discussions and provided the framework for the Federal Government to take new responsibility for fighting crime and enhancing public safety in neighborhoods and communities across the country. No one was under the illusion that crime could easily be banished. In fact, when Johnson accepted the *Challenge of Crime* report in 1967, he cautioned that the war on crime would take generations to wage. Nevertheless, the Commission, with its diligent analysis and farsighted recommendations, laid the groundwork for a coherent national policy to combat crime that has stood the test of time.

Happy 40th, Commissioners.

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Notes

1. Since 1984, the Office of Justice Programs (OJP) has provided Federal leadership in developing the Nation's capacity to prevent and control crime, improve the criminal and juvenile justice systems, increase knowledge about crime and related issues, and assist crime victims. OJP's bureaus and offices are the National Institute of Justice, the Office of the Assistant Attorney General, the Bureau of Justice Assistance, the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the Community Capacity Development Office, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, and the Office for Victims of Crime.
2. *The Challenge of Crime in a Free Society,* which was accompanied by nine task force reports, was 308 pages long and contained 202 recommendations to control crime and improve criminal justice in America. In addition to chapters dealing with the major crime issues, the report discussed such issues as the role of science and technology, crime research, and the problem of drunkenness, and outlined a national strategy for action on individual, local, State, and Federal levels. The President's Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice, *The Challenge of Crime in a Free Society,* Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, February 1967, available at www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/42.pdf.

3. Lyndon B. Johnson first discussed his goals for the Great Society in a speech at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor on May 22, 1964 (*Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Lyndon B. Johnson, 1963–64,* Volume I, entry 357, pp. 704–707, Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1965, available at www.lbjlib.utexas.edu/johnson/archives.hom/speeches.hom/640522.asp). Once elected, he initiated a set of domestic programs that focused on a variety of issues, including education, health care, civil rights, and poverty.
4. The Uniform Crime Reports, or UCR, had been collected since 1930, first by the International Association of the Chiefs of Police, then later by the U.S. Department of Justice, through the Federal Bureau of Investigation. The UCR provided the only national crime trend data at the time of the Crime Commission. Even into the 1990's, the UCR data contained gaps in jurisdictions reporting, missing data, and likely errors in reporting.
5. This became the Law Enforcement Assistance Act, which led to the establishment of the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration, the forerunner of the Office of Justice Programs, the U.S. Department of Justice agency within which the National Institute of Justice resides.
6. Woolley, J., and G. Peters, *The American Presidency Project,* Santa Barbara, CA: University of California (hosted), Gerhard Peters (database), available at www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=27242.
7. *The Challenge of Crime in a Free Society,* 273.